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SUBJECT: ELECTORAL COMMISSION CHIEF DEFENDS HIS PAST AND
PRESENT PERFORMANCE

Classified By: Ambassador Robin R. Sanders; Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Chairperson Professor Maurice Iwu passionately defended his performance as head of Nigeria's electoral body during a January 28 office call by Ambassador and PolOff (note-taker). He also discussed INEC's preparations for the February 2010 Anambra gubernatorial and 2011 national elections, noting that he welcomed observation of the Anambra elections by U.S. and other observers. The Ambassador noted that the USG did not have confidence in him or INEC's ability to run a fair election process, and that we remained one of his greatest critics. Iwu took this on board, confirmed his nationality, adamantly defended his INEC record in the 2007 election; and, believed INEC was prepared to conduct decent elections in ¶2011. END SUMMARY.

IWU TENURE ENDS IN JUNE

¶2. (SBU) Iwu provided a report card of his tenure as Chairman, after appointment by previous President Obasanjo in 2005 to a five-year term, set to expire in June. He said his appointment is scheduled to expire in June 2010, but he did not say whether he would recommit for another term, nor did he offer clues as to who the new INEC chief may be. He said he welcomed the participation of civil society and international election observers, noting that he had authorized the granting of credentials to representatives from 33 civil society organizations, stakeholders, and interest groups, including six observers from the U.S. Mission in Nigeria, in the upcoming Anambra vote.

INEC'S ROLE

¶3. (C) Iwu claimed that "INEC doesn't conduct elections," explaining that in the past, the Resident Electoral Commissioner (REC) appointed poll workers, supervised their work, supervised the vote tabulation, and submitted results to INEC. INEC officials, he claimed, had no role in the accuracy of the vote count at the polling stations because they were not present in the polling stations in 2007. In 2011 INEC staffers will be in the polling stations. He then went on to identified a litany of problems that he described as "beyond his control," including voter intimidation; police

uniforms worn by others; unlimited campaign spending; ownership of the news media by politicians, thereby producing biased news coverage; lack of gender balance among candidates; allegations of political parties buying voter cards to influence the vote; and disproportional emphasis on winning elections at all costs -- causing a "willingness to kill for power." He remarked that political campaigning had become a full-time occupation, allowing little time for officials to govern. Iwu complained of lack of internal democracy in political parties, which, he alleged, did not even obey their own rules. He also noted the high propensity for election violence in the country because of these issues.

Non-governmental organizations created by partisans, he said, often signed up to serve as monitors, thereby working to influence results for their parties. Iwu, in particular, slammed the proliferation of political parties in Nigeria. He noted that INEC, to date has registered 57 parties -- all of which, he claimed had "no differences, no principles, and no platforms." In short, he described them all as "interchangeable."

WHAT INEC,S PLANS ARE FOR 2011

14. (C) He claimed that this litany of electoral problems in Nigeria remained beyond his ability to change, but that INEC was trying to put in place as many procedures as possible to reduce these problems. Of note, he highlighted bio data-linked voter cards, and having both INEC and National Youth Corps staff serve as poll monitors (which had not been

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the case in recent national elections) to have better oversight over the process. Before, in 2007, Iwu claimed Regional Electoral Commissioners (REC,s) chose the polling monitors from the local community building in vested interest, rigging, and lack of transparency at the polls. The RECs will no longer have that role with the INEC staff and National Youth Corps members in that position, and will only have the role of certifying the results at the state level after all of the INEC staff, National Youth Corps, political party and civil society representatives who are monitors have certified their records before they are sent to the state level. The INEC Chairman added that voting ballots will also be serialized and that INEC had recommended that the general election be conducted over two days given the size of Nigeria. What INEC has recommended to the executive branch is to conduct the national elections over two days. For example, on day one the northeast and southeast will hold elections and on day two, the northwest and southwest will. The INEC Board felt given the logistical challenges of the country that this would help alleviate the problems that happened in 2007. This recommendation does not require a constitutional amendment, and most of Nigeria,s election problems are based on a lack of respect for transparent elections processes as opposed to problems in the Election Act of 2006.

USG SEES IWU AND INEC AS OBSTACLES FOR 2011

15. (C) The Ambassador stated that her intent was not to be personally rude, but that the USG had little faith and confidence in either his ability or INEC,s to run a transparent election process. In addition, most of the stakeholders that spoke to the recent US-UK funded election assessment team cited lack of confidence in the entire INEC Board. INEC they believed was the number one problem for the 2011 election. She wanted to know how he expected to rebuild this confidence in not only himself, but the institution responsible for running the elections, INEC.

16. (C) For his part, Iwu said he has heard the critics, and that he is okay with the criticism because he is a man of

"integrity, a scientist," and had no gain from serving as INEC Chairman. His goal in accepting the INEC position was to give back to his country of birth. Iwu said that he felt he had the systematic, research-based skills to help Nigeria turn its history of bad elections around. The INEC Chairman added that he had no regrets because he did his "job in good faith," and as outlined above the "the culture of rigging and corruption are areas not under INEC,s control to change." "Those who claim INEC was responsible for these problems in 2007 do not know Nigeria," he concluded. The Ambassador said that all eyes of the international community will be on INEC,s performance in the upcoming gubernatorial election in Anambra to see if anything he outlined above regarding an improvement in the process pans out.

ANAMBRA TESTS NEW METHODS

¶7. (SBU) Iwu said that INEC was ready for Anambra, and see it as a test case, particularly using the National Youth Corps and INEC staff as poll monitors. According to the INEC Chairman, the gubernatorial election in Anambra will be the first one to pilot use of a new biometric voter card, containing a data chip and a color photograph of the voter, to try to stop voter substitutions. Due to the low percentage of voters who have picked up their new biometric card, however, voters may cast their ballots if they report to a polling station where they registered, their name appears on the voter list, and they show a temporary card. The indelible ink used on forefinger to vote will serve as a control to prevent multiple voting by the same individual. He also shared with us that there were 4,000 polling stations in the state, and therefore to ensure a smooth process they planned to have 8,000 monitors, roughly 2 at each polling site.

COMMENT

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¶8. (C) Iwu passionately defended his neutrality, personal reputation, and feeling of duty to his country. He explained some of the changes in procedures that INEC has implemented during his tenure, reportedly to make elections more credible and smooth. It remains to be seen if any of the new INEC procedures will work. Admittedly, the environment in which he and INEC operate is not the most conducive to credible elections, with pervasive corruption and almost universal impunity. For better or worse, the INEC Chairperson has presided over numerous state-level elections marred by fraud and violence, including the national elections in 2007. Even if the Anambra elections go more smoothly than expected, his legacy will be a largely negative one at best. However, expectations are that the potential for vote rigging and fraud in the Anambra elections are high given candidates like the former CBN governor Soludo who reportedly will stop at no amount of money to ensure he ends up in the governor,s mansion. END COMMENT.

¶9. (U) ConGen Lagos coordinated this telegram with Embassy Abuja.
BLAIR